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FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1070
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0989
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
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RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION

UNCLAS ANTANANARIVO 000198

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SUBJECT: MADAGASCAR "REGIONAL COUNSELOR" ELECTIONS MARCH 16

REFTEL: ANTANANARIVO 1269 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. In the final days before the March 16 elections for 147 regional counselors, the fifth election Madagascar has seen in just 15 months, campaign season is finally picking up some speed. Voters around the country have expressed fatigue and a general lack of understanding regarding the role of regional counselors. The new position is being put in place to implement changes in the administrative structure outlined in the April 2007 constitutional referendum, which abolished the six-province structure in favor of 22 regions.

¶2. Rather than campaigning on issues, representatives of the President's TIM party have been explaining the importance of regional counselors to regional development and urging voters to turn out in massive numbers for the elections. As in past elections, government officials have been deeply involved in the campaign; cabinet ministers are each assigned to "coach" a region. Local neighborhood chiefs have been distributing voter cards door-to-door, both to correct administrative glitches noted in past elections and to bolster the government effort to "get out the vote." Meanwhile, opposition candidates are urging voters to boycott the elections. Various government authorities are responding to boycott messages with threats in some localities to arrest those disseminating them. No arrests have occurred to date, however.

MARQUARDT